

THE LEGISLATOR AS REPRESENTATIVE

Factors Affecting How A House Member Serves in Public Office

OVERVIEW

The legislator has a number of roles – as representative, as lawmaker, and as controller of the purse strings. Though the member serves as representative in all of these roles, the member has a direct role as representative in serving the district. This section of the *Orientation Guide* covers matters of interest to the individual legislator.

CONCERNS OF THE INDIVIDUAL REPRESENTATIVE

As an individual representative, the House member has a number of concerns. Areas of particular importance, all of which are explained more fully in the following pages, are:

♦ **Constituent Services**

The member may serve district constituents in a variety of ways, including: assisting in obtaining aid from public agencies; providing information about state programs, current law, and pending legislation; seeking ideas and opinions and expressing his or her own; providing assistance at the State Capitol; and securing assistance, projects, and programs for the district.

♦ **Laws Concerning Legislators' Conduct and Conflict of Interest (ethics and financial disclosure, campaign finance, lobbyists, elections, and other prohibited conduct)**

The Code of Governmental Ethics permits the member to receive only certain things having economic value from certain persons and specifically prohibits certain actions and activities. It also requires legislators to disclose income from certain sources and certain information relative to filing tax returns. The campaign finance laws require reports of election contributions and expenditures, limit the amounts of contributions, and also prohibit certain practices. The legislature has enacted laws regulating legislative lobbying. These laws require registration and disclosure of expenditures by lobbyists and regulate campaign contributions by lobbyists and lobbyist principals during legislative sessions. Other laws prohibit certain practices in elections. Additionally, a number of provisions of the Criminal Code affect public officeholders.

RESOURCES AVAILABLE TO ASSIST THE MEMBER

♦ **Emoluments**

Allowances are available for district office expenses and furnishings, payment of the salary of a legislative assistant, and the member's monthly expenses.

♦ **Information Resources**

Many resources to assist the member in matters of concern to the member and the district are available from staff in Baton Rouge, both information in written form and other types of assistance. Many other state government sources of information and assistance are available to the member and his or her constituents. (See *Information Resources* beginning on page G-1.)

SERVICES TO CONSTITUENTS

Some Ways a Representative May Assist Constituents

Interaction with constituents is a basic activity of any legislator. The following is an overview of some of the types of services that a legislator can provide to his or her constituents.

DISTRICT OFFICE

Maintaining a district office with a capable and responsive legislative assistant is very important. The district office is the hub of constituent linkage and is the nucleus around which all services and contacts revolve.

CASEWORKER

As a “caseworker”, the legislator and his or her staff can aid in solving both governmental and personal problems. A constituent or a local agency may need specific help or information to resolve a wide range of difficulties, such as those related to hurricane recovery, social services, Medicaid, public retirement systems, transportation, public safety, or corrections. The legislator is often an arbiter and an enabler, intervening with a state agency on a constituent's behalf. Veterans, or their dependents or survivors, may need assistance in dealing with state and federal veterans' offices. Many times constituents only need to locate the correct person to assist them with a governmental problem, and other times they just want someone to hear their story. When a problem is satisfactorily resolved, this “casework” can be very rewarding.

STUDENT FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE

Information concerning student financial aid for postsecondary education is frequently the subject of inquiry from constituents. The Louisiana Office of Student Financial Assistance (LOSFA) acts as the state guarantor under the Federal Family Education Loan Program and administers most state funded grant and scholarship programs, including the Tuition Opportunity Program for Students (TOPS), a merit-based aid program, and the Louisiana Go Grant Program, a need-based aid program. LOSFA also administers the START program, a qualified state tuition program, which is designed to give parents a tax-advantaged method of saving for their children's postsecondary education and includes a matching state grant for amounts saved. Information concerning the programs administered by LOSFA and other sources of postsecondary education financing can be found on LOSFA's website (<http://www.osfa.state.la.us>) or by calling their toll-free phone number at 1-800-259-5626. The financial aid office of any postsecondary institution is also a good source of information concerning student financial assistance. Legislators also have the ability under state law to award a tuition-free scholarship at Tulane University, subject to specific guidelines.

An overview of the program is available on Tulane's website as follows:
(http://financialaid.tulane.edu/legislative_scholarship.shtml).

In addition, Tulane can provide information at (504) 988-3390. (For more information regarding these provisions of law, contact the staff of the House Committee on Education at (225) 342-2408.)

INFORMATION ABOUT LEGISLATION

The legislator and his or her assistant are often called upon to provide specific information about legislation, both proposed legislation being considered during session and that enacted into law during a previous session. House Legislative Services staff can help by providing information on existing or proposed law. In addition, district office assistance phone lines staffed by the Poynter Legislative Research Library, as well as certain computer programs and the legislative websites, provide a wealth of information, including bill status, bill history, bill text, amendments, fiscal notes, committee agendas, and daily journals. (See *Information Resources* beginning on page G-1.)

KEEPING IN TOUCH WITH CONSTITUENTS

To keep in touch with constituents' views, a legislator may have community meetings where people can express opinions or concerns. The legislator will also receive correspondence expressing opinions on certain bills and issues. Constituents will telephone, fax, or e-mail their legislator during session concerning the legislator's vote on certain bills. Returning calls and emails from constituents can help the legislator better understand how the people of the district stand on particular issues or bills before an upcoming vote. Newsletters or opinion polls sent to voters can inform them about session activities and provide feedback to the legislator.

The House Public Information Office ((225) 342-9795) in the State Capitol Annex (office B33) assists members and staff with all facets of public information and media relations as they develop and set public policy. To accomplish this mission, the office designs marketing strategies; offers informational materials including speeches, a House newsletter, and weekly session updates on legislation; provides media services, including still photography and news releases; creates publications that increase knowledge of and promote public involvement in the legislative process; acts as liaison with the media, schools and community organizations, and the public; and develops audio, video, and print communication materials. Visit the office website at http://house.louisiana.gov/h_pio/index.asp.

TOURS

Arranging tours of the State Capitol may be requested by schools or other groups in the district. The state tourist information desk in the Capitol will help with the arrangements. When groups visit, House members may, as a point of personal privilege, introduce them while the House is in session. The House Public Information Office ((225) 342-9795) can also provide photos of your group at the Capitol,

information about other Baton Rouge tour sites, arrangements for students' lunches, and a more detailed program about the House and the legislative process. (For more information on State Capitol tours, see page G-7.)

ASSISTING LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Local governments rely heavily upon financial assistance from state government. State government provides assistance through annual appropriations for such programs as supplemental pay for police and firemen, dedicated revenues from state taxes, and revenues allocated as required by the constitution. Legislators often introduce legislation to provide for assistance to local government, such as the return of sales tax revenues collected from hotels to the tourism commission, the governing authority, or some other entity in the parish in which the money was collected. Legislators work with their officials to develop legislation needed to assist local governments and special districts in carrying out their functions and to assist with economic development in the member's district.